NEW YORK
HERALD TRIBUNE
MAY 4 1961

On a Guatemala Mountain

A Cuban Rebel's Diary: Life in the Training Camp

The following story by a survivor of the abortive Cuban invasion tells of his departure from the United States and training in Guatemala.

By Manuel Penabaz
Written for United Press International

MIAMI, May 3.—I had hoped to spend Easter with my wife, Leopoldina, and my two children, Ana Maria, eleven, and Manuel, seven, before leaving to join our liberation forces.

They had already suffered enough because of my political situation. I believed they deserved that small happiness before the grief of my departure to join the fight for my country's freedom.

But one morning in mid-January, the telephone rang.

"Your name is Manuel Rafael Penabaz?" a voice asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I am speaking from the general staff of the Revolutionary Democratic Front (F. R. D.). Your mobilization has been ordered. Be ready at 5 p. m. at our office in Miami for your orders."

Had Expected Call

I confess that while I was expecting the call for several days, it caught me by surprise and filled me with concern. I was face-to-face with the reality of what I, myself, had decided.

The date was Jan. 24, 1961. From notes in my diary, here is an account of the most important events in the next three momentous months:

Jan. 24—Leo (his nickname for his wife) is nervous and she is making a great effort to keep me with her. "They are going to kill you," she says. I tell her no. My good friends, Dr. Mario Leon and Enrique Solo, drive me to the Frente (F. R. D.) office on 19th St. in Miami. They promise to take care of my family if something happens to me. I wave good by. Leo tries to smile. The children were at her side, the girl saddened, the boy proud without even understanding what is going on.

The drive downtown was made in silence. As I got out of the car, Dr. Leon says, "I am going to tell you something foolish. If something happens to you, your family won't have problems." Will I ever forget that generous man? We embrace and I go into the white house that is the headquarters for the hope of Cuba. Fifty-nine recruits are inside. Tension is written on every face. Shortly, I hear the sing-song accent of my province of Oriente, and I go up to the speaker. It was Mir, from Holguin in Oriente, who, like myself, had fought with Castro in the Sierra Maestra. They gave us shoes and uniforms, a box lunch, two pairs of high black boots and the clothes we were going to wear in the camps. My own clothes were left there.

Addresses by Officers

About 9 o'clock, the chief of the general staff, Col. Martin Elena, called us together in the patio. Standing alongside him was a fat man. It was Col. Oscar Diaz, also on the general staff. . . . Elena spoke to us in a rough voice. He had a reputation as an honest man—and this is worth noting in an ex-officer in the army of Fulgencio Batista. Diaz also spoke. After those speeches, not one man in the group was left with a feeling of ease or satisfaction about what awaited him in the training camps or unknown future.

Our group, they tell us, is one of the largest ever to be sent at one time to the camps, and two trucks were sent to pick us up. . . . They took us to Opa-Locka where a C-46 transport plane was waiting. The plane had no marking insignia on it.

Off to Guatemala

At the airport, we went into an old warehouse and there I saw the first North Americans. One of them said, "We are members of the F. B. I." They are tall and strong-looking. Another said he was a C. I. A. agent. A third said he was an employee of the United Fruit Company. But all of them sound like they are joking.

Around midnight, we board the plane and take off, some seated on the floor. There isn't much conversation. I treat int our thoughts. I occupy myself with the diary. A man with a German accent tells us we will be flying seven hours. We all know we are headed for Guatemala even though nobody told us.

Jan. 25—we arrived ten hours ago. The name of the airport is Retalhuleu, but for a few minutes we had our doubts. Getting off the plane, they lined us up, and a priest came up looking serious and said: "Gentlemen, welcome to the Dominican Republic. Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo sends you his regards." It was a joke, but a joke that upset some for a while. Later, we learned that the pilots do this with all the new arrivals. Within a few minutes, all of us are laughing.

Bombs Stacked on Field

One of the first things I noticed was the great number of airplanes on the field. One section of the airport is stacked high with bombs. An officer came up and gave us orders. We piled into three trucks and drove for over four hours.

At the gates of the base, guards armed with rifles and machineguns were on duty. They are the first fighting men we see. They shouted greetings. The camp is on a plateau and, despite the altitude, there still are other mountains towering over us on all sides.

The trucks stopped in a field surrounded by wooden barracks with zinc roofs. They ordered us to get out and we lined up to receive our sleeping bags, cartridge belts with a knife, and mess kits. Some of the boys also received rifles.

Assigned to Battalions

Next we were assigned to our battalions—mine the heavy guns battalion commanded by Roberto Perez San Roman, brother o fthe chief of the brigade. When we entered the barracks, Roberto personally greeted us and told us that we should think it over carefully before joining that battalion because it was a technical battalion and if, later on, we decided we didn't like it, it wouldn't be easy to get a transfer.

I told him I liked the 4.2 mortar and would like to learn to handle that weapon. He said he was pleased because it was the best weapon in the brigade. "With that one," he said, "we may liquidate the enemy."

We were both tired and excited, but exhaustion or no exhaustion they told us we should prepare for an exercise that same night. After eating, around 7 p. m., we went to the firing range, abuot 500 meters (1,600 feet) higher than the camp, where we saw two 30 calibre machineguns.

A Test Under Fire

They explained that the exercise consisted in crawling through the barbed wire while they fired three feet over our heads. At the same time, bombs were exploded around us. Several of our men fainted.

When it was over—I think it was one of the most violent experiences of my life, even after combat in the Sierra Maestra—we discovered that two of our men had suffered punctured eardrums and one had cut his hands badly on the barbed wire. I felt satisfied because, despite my thirty-seven years, I withstood the test well, a test for much younger men.

Running at 7,000 Feet

Jan. 26—At 5 this morning, we were awakened by the bugle call and the shouting of Perez Marquez, one of our officers. Roberto San Roman ordered us to run at double-time to the field. Running at 7,000 feet without training is something that demands extraordinary stamina—and will power. I ran fifteen minutes and finally collapsed.

That afternoon I saw the first foreigner—a Japanese called "Jackie" who was giving judo instructions to the paratroops. He is slim, carries a knife in his belt, and walks like a cowboy.

Feb. 5—Our second Sunday in camp. . . . The training has been hard, but already I feel like an expert. We have learned how to fire pistols, machineguns, BAR's (Browning automatic rifles), bazookas, grenade launchers and our querida (dear) 4.2 mortar.

Instructors "Nice Guys"

The instructors all seem to be nice guys, always joking and using the language. I suppose them speak to us in English, and those of us who know English translate for our buddies. The instructors are from all over—North Americans, Japanese, Filipinos, a Mexican and Czechs.

March 5—Last week, Jose San Roman called to tell me I was going to be chief of the brigade's legal department. With him was Jose Morales Cruz, G-1 of the brigade. They tell me there is too much lack of discipline and too much crime in the camp and want it stopped immediately. They told me I would have one week to prepare a code of military justice for the camp.

Rumors Flood Camp

April 8—The camp is alive with rumors. The invasion is about to come. No one knows when, but every one is guessing.

We've also heard they have eliminated the general staff in Miami, and that means the brakes are off on shipment of any Cuban who wants to train for battle, despite his political background.

Any Cuban who wants to fight communism now has the right to carry a rifle, and they're arriving in droves. There will be time to judge the criminals once we get to Cuba. So many persons have arrived in the last few weeks that there is no more room in the barracks, and hundreds are sleeping outside in the field.

Morale is high, nonetheless, and starting at 5 a. m., we hear the shouts of men taking calisthenics and the fire of the 75-mm. cannons and the 50-mm. machineguns. Some time the entire brigade goes out on exercises together, on maneuvers and practice landings.

Still, I am worried about many of the newcomers—too many of them are old men or weak, and one wonders what they will be able to do in battle.

On the Way

April 10—we're on our way. This morning, Jose San Roman personally woke us up with pokes from a pole. "Fellows," he said, "the entire brigade will form in the parade field." All of us on the staff knew what this meant. San Roman never had spoken to the entire brigade. I remember Feb. 24, (Cuban Independence Day) San Roman asked me to speak to the brigade, saying he was a soldier and not an orator. Now his speech was short, laconic—but convincing.

He said he has faith in the brigade, in our equipment, and God is with us. He told us to fight aggressively, but respect prisoners—we are not to kill them. He warned against asaults or thefts. At dusk we leave the camp in fourteen trucks, going back down that road we took more than two months ago. We ride silently—we've been told the enemy would be watching for us. Already we are approaching the airbase—how much shorter this trip than the last time. A little while ago, about 100 Indians in a town we passed were in the doar waving at us and saying: "So long. Go to fight." Aparently our departure is no secret.